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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 000541

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PINR, PINS, PNAT, PREL, ES, HO
SUBJECT: AT A HIGH COST OF LIVES AND MONEY, ZELAYA
MAINTAINS SINGLE-MINDED FOCUS ON SOTO CANO

REF: A. TEGUCIGALPA 527 B. 07TEGUCIGALPA1678

Classified By: Ambassador Charles A. Ford, reason 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY and ACTION REQUEST: Twelve days after the TACA 390 crash at Tegucigalpa's Toncontin International airport (Reftel A), the initial investigation points mostly to pilot error, and the fuselage should be completely removed from the highway by Wednesday. President Zelaya has found himself backed into a corner. At his discretion, flights to and from Tegucigalpa of other than small aircraft (less than 42 passenger capacity) remain cancelled. A chorus of public and private opposition is mounting, as are economic losses. The military, including the Defense Minister, Honduran Air Force and Joint Chiefs, is dutifully attempting to put into action President Zelaya's impulsive announcement that a civilian/commercial dual use facility would be opened at Soto Cano (Palmerola) airbase within 60 days. Their option-less strategy to is urge the United States to allow use of almost all key services and equipment at the base for a temporary, yet unspecified period. Post has strong concerns about legal liability and technical capacity tied to assisting GOH with civilian operations at the base, even for a temporary period and requests guidance in the shortest time period possible, in coordination with SOUTHCOM, on a response to this request.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) In recent days, President Zelaya is finding himself with fewer and fewer supporters in his bid to keep Toncontin Airport effectively closed to international flights. Some private airlines reportedly have indicated they would rather keep their flights at San Pedro Sula, the current alternative destination for international traffic, than move to Soto Cano. Taca has maintained its position that it would not use Toncontin again if it opens, probably in an attempt to reduce its own liability for the crash. In the face of public opposition, always fickle President of Congress Roberto Micheletti has reversed his previous support for moving the international airport and is calling to reopen Toncontin. Zelaya has responded by declaring that he has already completed 290 of the 300 required steps to open an international airport, but local press deftly pointed out that he failed to specify the 10 steps he had not completed, which surely include construction of a terminal, viable

runway, sewage and water systems, and buildings for customs and migration.

¶13. (U) Local press is also reporting that there have been 300 deaths in the last three years on the highway connecting Tegucigalpa to Soto Cano, underscoring the real safety factors involved in this rash decision. Post has also heard informally of at least two deaths, and another now comatose victim, of traffic accidents which occurred on the same road while in transit from Tegucigalpa to the airport at San Pedro Sula. Press also reports economic losses of at least USD 21 million over the last week due to the airport closure, and laments rising job losses, cancellations of international conferences and visits by investors, and empty hotels in Tegucigalpa.

Crash Investigation Points to Pilot Error

¶14. (C) The leader of the NTSB/FAA team assisting Salvadoran investigators looking into the May 30 crash gave Embassy staff a close-hold, preliminary readout of his findings on June 6, stressing that final conclusions might not be available for more than a year. Preliminary indications point to some level of pilot error coupled with a wet runway, and landing long with a significant tailwind. The NTSB expert, who hopes to return periodically to continue to assist the Salvadoran investigation, said crowning and grooving the runway would enhance its safety. But he said the runway was still usable and "I would land on it with my family tomorrow" and pointed out that the Taca 390 crash was the first serious accident at Toncontin Airport in more than 17 years.

Military Charged with Creating a Civilian Operation

¶15. (C) Despite strong evidence that the crash was caused in large part by pilot error, President Zelaya has maintained his public position that he is concerned about the potential political costs of another accident at Toncontin, and has declared the airport indefinitely closed to Class C and D flights until further notice. (Note: The Honduran Civil Aviation authorities are defining Class C and D flights as 42 passengers or more. Class A and B, defined by the authorities as 42 passengers or less, have been operating out of the airport as normal since the evening of May 30. Federal Aviation Authority, ICAO, and aviation experts on the ground have told post that the international standard for classifying aircraft is actually based on landing speed, and suspect that the GOH definition is arbitrary. End Note.) Under the guise of a transport "emergency," Zelaya charged the Honduran military, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Air Force, and the Ministry of Defense with drafting and executing a plan to open the Soto Cano joint air base as a dual-use military-civilian airport within 60 days of the accident. His order stipulates that the civilian use may not interrupt existing military operations at the base.

¶16. (C) Mil Group Commander, DATT and Econ Off attended a meeting June 9 with the Honduran military, headed by CHOD Vasquez Velazquez, to discuss the GOH plan for creation of this dual-use facility on such short notice. CHOD underscored at every opportunity the need to achieve this transition without affecting current military operations at the base. Honduran military presented the plan under the assumption that developing an international airport at the base which follows International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) regulations would require at least two years and USD 50 to 100 million. The presentation recognized the need for involvement of over 13 Honduran government agencies in long-term conversion of the base to a dual-use facility.

¶17. (C) But the real focus of the conversation was the need for "strong JTF-Bravo cooperation" in the short term, meaning provision by Joint Task Force-Bravo of all critical base

operations utilities, personnel, and equipment. These include: electricity, water, sewage, trash collection and incineration, fuel storage, runway maintenance, control tower operations and equipment, navigation equipment, radio communications equipment, fire and rescue personnel and equipment, and medical infirmary. Additional consultations on temporary parking, security entrance and exit from the base, and the security perimeter, would also be necessary. Finally, despite previous discussions about division of the military and civilian sides of the base (Reftel B), the military indicated it plans to use the same runway and ramp for both, and had not developed concrete plans to divide the two sides. The presentation did not mention other details such as animal/bird control, ramp lighting and HAZMAT response and disposal.

¶8. (C) Vasquez told Embassy offs that GOH has no alternatives if the U.S. denies this assistance and meekly admitted he would have to consult airport concessions manager Carlos Ramos to find other solutions. Near the conclusion of the presentation, Minister of Defense Mejia joined the meeting, and started by declaring that Zelaya had hastily made the decision without the advice of experts, and that it was up to Mejia and his military advisors to lay out the options "in black and white" for the President, including what the United States can and cannot do. Mejia strongly implied that the military does not back Zelaya's plan and is looking for a pretext to scrap it.

¶9. (C) Embassy PolCouns, DATT and Econ off were summoned to a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on June 10. Though the diplomatic note informing us of the meeting implied we would be observers, the meeting was an abbreviated version of the day before. The only difference were that interlocutors from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were now present, including lawyers form the MFA's treaty office. Twice during the meeting, they expressed their willingness to quickly negotiate changes or addendums to the existing Bilateral Military Assistance Agreement of 1954 if it were required to commercialize the airstrip. Embassy offs reiterated that we would need a few days to seek guidance from SOUTHCOM and U.S. policy makers and would provide a formal response when we have been able to study the legal implications of providing this type of assistance.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) There is mounting evidence that the GOH has no physical excuse to keep Toncontin closed and the political game is becoming more clear. Post has concerns about the GOH assignment of a team from El Salvador to head the ongoing investigation and report about the causes of the crash. Taca is based in El Salvador, and we believe there are serious possible conflicts of interest. We would urge Embassy San Salvador to underscore the political implications of threatening operations at Soto Cano for the entire region.

¶11. (C) Minister of Defense Mejia's search for an excuse to cease planning of a Soto Cano dual-use facility on a compressed schedule is understandable, but post is proceeding with caution. We want Mejia to deliver the news in a way that does not give Zelaya, who is rumored to be flirting with airport financing offers from Hugo Chavez and a construction offer from the PRC, fuel to vilify the United States. We also see a continued lack of strategic thinking on the part of advisors, who have twice summoned U.S. diplomatic and military officials to meetings, hoping for immediate answers to their request for our temporary assistance. Strikingly absent in these discussions with GOH officials is the possibility of making temporary improvements to Toncontin, which would entail crowning and grooving the runway at a much lower price, and/or moving the international airport to a more practical location closer to Tegucigalpa. Feasibility studies at three sites were done years ago. In the last week, according to one World Bank representative, World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC), has expressed

interest to GOH officials in financing construction or reconditioning of Honduran international airport, wherever it ends up.

¶12. (C) Post believes our response to the GOH should be clear that we cannot provide utilities, logistical support or equipment for commercial use at the base, and that the response must focus on legal liability issues and the fact that we cannot accept payment for these services. We request guidance from SOUTHCOM, with interagency input, as soon as possible. Post has already informally reminded Honduran officials that we have been working with them on the possible joint commercial/military use of the Soto Cano airbase for several years, most recently in October 2007 (see Reftel B), and that we have not objected to the idea. In October, the meetings concluded with an agreement that the GOH would develop and present a plan focused on commerical cargo - not passenger flights - which to date we have not seen. When the plan to convert Palmerola on short notice fails within the next week to two weeks, we should be prepared to respond to the GOH by publicly presenting these facts. End Comment.

FORD